

SPAMitis: How It Can Kill YOUR Business!

By Brian Schaeffer

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Brian Schaeffer
JoinTheFreedom@netscape.net

How To Work From Home <http://www.howtoworkfromhome.info>

In case you've been stuck on a deserted island recently, SPAM has been making the news in the last few months. People are fed up with SPAM's inconvenience and mess! ISPs are angry that SPAM is choking their servers and stealing their bandwidth! Employers are alarmed over the estimated \$10 billion in lost productivity each year due to SPAM. Congress doesn't really have a clue, as usual, but they want to seem fed up too, so they're looking into creating rules and regulations tightly controlling internet email marketing without actually understanding it! SPAM has become such a popular subject now-a-days that even 20/20 aired a segment on their August 1, 2003, TV show about it!

The modern use of the term "spam" comes from the product that is made of a meat-like substance; a kind of cheap, facsimile meat. Most people who've tasted it just once can't stand to taste it again. Monty Python's Flying Circus, a TV show years ago, used the word in - what is now - an infamous skit. The word "spam" was repeated over and over during the skit, hundreds of times; hence, the evolved internet use of the term to mean a bad tasting thing that is continuously replicated.

What exactly do I mean by "online SPAM"? It is generally defined as an unsolicited commercial emailing, usually to many thousands or millions of people. For most, the key word here is "unsolicited". It's the email in your inbox that wasn't invited by you, nor is it wanted. If you're an online business, the key word is "commercial". Unfortunately, that word is quickly becoming dirty in some internet and political circles! Many people - ordinary Joe and Joette web surfers, independent service providers, politicians and others - are beginning to see ALL commercial email as SPAM, or at the very least, with dubious SPAM-like qualities. That is, of course, ridiculous.

Responsible online business owners - millions of us, mind you - use opt-in, and even double opt-in, subscriber and customer policies to govern how and when we contact someone for a commercial reason. However, one can see a problem arising from the meltdown ashes of having been burnt by SPAM. Namely, legitimate online commerce communication is increasingly viewed as a pest in general, and can be viewed as a SPAMatic invasive intrusion, specifically. In the latter case, you and your web site might be placed on a Blacklist of Spammers because one opted-in person on your list forgot who and what you are. That can carry dire consequences for your online future, and should be of great concern for all aboveboard, online marketers.

The viewpoint that legitimate messages might be SPAM will quickly hurt a business' bottom line if it isn't addressed. Even more threatening is the possibility of losing your permission to contact some of your list because they've decided to just delete everything except personal emails, opt-out of your customer list, or install a SPAM Killer. If that last one is true, then your emails probably aren't getting

through because your address isn't on their "allowed list" or the messages have a SPAM value higher than five points! Thus making one of your best marketing strategies, direct emailing to an opt-in list of customers, much less effective.

Don't despair! There are some of things an online business owner can do!

First, learn how SPAM Killer programs work. Usually they run an email through a series of character tests and award points or partial points for specific characteristics. (Go to: <http://spamassassin.taint.org/tests.html> to see a list of Spam Assassin's tests - a typical series.) In short, the higher your email's points, the more likely it will be considered SPAM and junked. The rule of thumb here is to have a message that scores less than five points at the very most! Less than three would be great, and less than one and a half is ideal. Each Killer has its own different series of tests, so making it through one doesn't necessarily mean you'll make it through the next, but it's more likely.

Second, empathize with your customers or subscribers. You know how they feel about SPAM because it's exactly how you feel about it. You don't like it. They don't like it. So, make sure that every time you contact a customer by email; use their name in the greeting instead of a generic "friend", remind them of whom you are, reiterate that they optioned into receiving emails from you, and let them know exactly why you are contacting them. Try to do all four of these in the opening and very first paragraph. Certainly, don't leave any of the four out of any email you send.

Variations of an email like this should do well:

Hi [Customer Name],

I hope you are enjoying using the [Product] you bought from us at [Your Business Name] on [Date]. Should you have any questions at all about [Product], please see the FAQ page at our web site: www.mybusiness.com/faq , or write to me personally at: Joe@mybusiness.com. I'll answer your inquiries. I'm writing to you today because you gave us permission to contact you when new products which might interest you became available.

Yahdy, yahdy, yahdy. Second paragraph.

Blah, blah, blah. Next paragraph, etc.

Yours with the highest respect and sincerity, much love and devotion (or whatever you like to say as a closing),

Joe E. Marketer

Also, work on your "Subject" line. Shoot for something that will not only capture your reader's attention, it will convey a sense of your working relationship with them. Remember, your "Subject" will probably decide the yea or nay of whether your customer will open your email or trash it without reading it.

One way to check your email's SPAM points before you send it is to run it through a validator. I use two free checkers for each email I write. These two validators have been very intrinsically consistent, although they never agree with each other's score for any particular email. I figure that if I pass both

series of tests, then my email is okay to send out. The two validators are:

- <http://www.lyris.com/contentchecker/>
- <http://www.emailcash.com/spamcheck.html>

Simply go to these sites and follow the directions on the page. They'll test your email for free and give you a report on the total number of points and from where the sub points came. That last is important because you can use the information to rewrite your email if it scores higher than five!

By-the-way, you need to know that the newer Killer programs are deducting large scores if your email has cloaking words in it. These are words that are deliberately altered so as to appear not to be that particular word. Cloakers use symbols or numbers interjected into a word, or in place of a letter, to disguise it from SPAM Killers. For example, many people will use "fr^ee" instead of "free" (the use of which adds to your overall score), or "b0nus" instead of "bonus". The new generation Killers really hate this practice and will add heavily to an email's total points if it finds cloakers in the text. Here's my favorite, all-time cloaker, "This is not sp~m....". That one is a grinner!

As always, your best bet against having your email deleted unopened is to have a strong working business relationship with your email recipient. You must consistently be open, honest and upfront with your customers at all times! That builds trust, and trust builds confidence that you'll be sending them something that they'll want to see!

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